

PERKINS COUNTY - NEBRASKA ENTREPRENEUR FINDS PLEASING THE POOCHES A PROFITABLE BUSINESS

When Melody Lee began baking her sophisticated dog cookies, she had no idea they would be so popular

Melody Lee's business was born out of passion.

Passion for her love of animals and love of baking.

When she collaborated the two together, this entrepreneur came up with an ingenious idea: making dog cookies.

The plan was birth when this former Colorado resident moved to Nebraska a few years ago. "I love Nebraska," she chimed. When Melody and her husband, Doug, found an acreage east of Grant it was easy to fall in love with the rural surroundings.

But when Melody fell ill, even the beauty of the Midwest couldn't heal the malady. "(The doctors) had me over medicated. I couldn't think, I couldn't do anything," she recalls. So she went to Arizona to stay with her sister to get well.

Prior to getting sick, Melody had plans on opening a concession stand. "I always wanted to do something," she said. After returning home, she took her enthusiasm for baking and animals to the next level.

"I love to bake and I love baking cookies. I can go into my own world baking," Melody said, her enthusiasm rising. "We have a friend in Colorado that we gave one of our lab puppies to and he saw that I like to bake, so he suggested making dog cookies.

"I played around with the idea. Then he sent me a box of cookie cutters and cookie recipes (for animals), so I tried baking the boys cookies and it just took off from there."

The 'boys' is Melody's affectionate expression for her four labs and poodle. She soon found that the boys were as enthusiastic about the cookies as she was.

"They know when I'm cooking them," she said. "Their noses are going crazy and they're pacing around the kitchen. They really, really want a cookie."

Melody began taking cookies to the Perkins County veterinary hospital operated by Shannon Jensen DVM, located in Grant, and it didn't take long for the idea to take off. Word-of-mouth spread the news about the dog treats and soon the veterinarian's office was requesting cookies for dogs with allergies, too: "At certain times when there's a lot of pollen, my poodle acts like he's having an asthma attack so I have to rub his throat, or if you have a pet and he's constantly licking his feet all the time that could be a sign they do not tolerate certain foods very well."

When Melody's poodle kept licking his feet, she made sure he no longer got any wheat in his dog food or in the cookies. The result? "He's not licking his feet like he used to," Melody notes. "A lot of people don't understand there's food you shouldn't give your dog, like chocolate or food that has onions in it."

Those are just a couple of the tips Melody plans to put on her website www.sophisticatedpooches.com, which falls in step with the name of her business, Sophisticated Pooches. "I named it that for the fact that I consider my dogs sophisticated. I give them nothing

but the best. And I wouldn't give something to someone else's dog that I wouldn't give my own. There's nothing I make that a human wouldn't eat." Her husband tries the cookies first because they won't feed their dog anything that they would not eat.

She's started the business nine months ago, and has already had requests from customers whose pets can't tolerate wheat. "If they want applesauce cookies, I can switch that out," Melody says of her versatile recipes. "I can make whatever it is they need."

MELODY IS ONE particular customer, and she treats her customers -- human and dog -- in the same fashion.

She makes the cookie dough by hand, refusing to use a machine to mix or pump out the finished product. "If I make the cookies with a machine they don't have the same consistency," she explains. "I have a mixer, blender and processor, but I personally cannot use any of them. Each cookie is hand done. When I say I'm hands on, I'm hands on! And I won't make them early and put them in the freezer either. They have to be fresh."

This baker is just as exact about the ingredients. "I don't use wheat in some of the recipes for the specialty cookies. I use white rice flour, garbanzo bean flour, brown rice or oat flour -- and I make my own oat flour."

There are no preservatives in these cookies whatsoever. I use low-fat milk and low-fat peanut butter; 99 percent of the time I use all-natural because I don't want my dogs to have a problem. If your dog is overweight and the vet says you have to cut fat, I have high-fiber recipes, too.

"My sister has Pugs and they're heavy, so she put them on a diet. She said as soon as she gets the box of cookies in the mail and opens it, her dogs go crazy and sit there and stare at the box."

Melody also tries to buy all her products locally or in Nebraska. "My flours and products are American made. I figure my dogs are American citizens so they deserve nothing but the best."

Although she bakes a variety of cookies, the most popular continues to be the Peanut Butter cookie -- "they love the peanut butter," Melody laughs. Oatmeal cookies are another popular flavor.

The dogs aren't particular about the shape and designs in the cookies, but their designer is. After the cut-out cookies are done -- with shapes from bones to hearts -- she also puts little designs on each cookie by hand, one-by-one. Holiday cookies are other fun shapes.

With word going out about the Sophisticated Pooches chewy delights, Melody has already been getting orders from as far as Florida, so she has had to develop a method to package her cookies. They are sold by weight, not volume, and since she doesn't want a single cookie to be broken, she's figured out a way to package them in the decorative black and white paw-print boxes so that every cookie comes out looking like it did when it came out of the oven.

She's also developing new ideas to the website to market other dog items, such as clothing, beds, blankets etc. "When people visit the website I want them to be able to click on 'free sample' and I'll send them a cookie, or if they send me a picture of their dog with one of the items they bought off my website and they send a picture, I want to post it and then have a contest and the lucky dog gets a supply of free cookies."

As the business expands, she's planning on building a small bakery in the back of her home and getting that new stove she's been wanting. She already foresees having to hire help. However,

she will not be doing any mass-production, insisting that each cookie must be handmade. She's also thinking about making beef liver treats and leathers, as well as creating new recipes and making her own dry dog food.

When it gets right down to bare bones, every dog is a sophisticated pooch in Melody's line of business. And with all the tender loving care put in each treat, it's easy to see why Melody says, "There's a lot of love in these cookies."